Gramsci in the Kindergarten: Creating and Transforming Cultural Spaces

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PATRICIA ONG
Auckland University of Technology

ABSTRACT
This article examines how early childhood education (ECE) settings in Aotearoa New Zealand can serve as counter-hegemonic spaces that affirm tamariki identities, languages, and cultural rights. Grounded in Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, it argues that ECE environments are not neutral but often reproduce Eurocentric norms through English dominance, Western developmental frameworks, and monocultural rituals. Policy frameworks including Te Whāriki (2017), Tapasā (2018), Ka Hikitia (2020), and the Action Plan for Pacific Education (2020), alongside the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), provide a foundation for resisting these hegemonies and sustaining diverse cultural worldviews. Drawing on practice examples such as pūrākau, whānau-led weaving, and culturally-sustaining arts, the article illustrates how kaiako and communities can co-construct transformative learning environments. It also identifies challenges, including tokenism, inconsistent teacher capability, and persistent privileging of English and Western developmental norms. The article contends that intentional, critically reflective pedagogy is vital for embedding cultural rights as foundational to ECE. By engaging with counter-hegemonic practice, kaiako can transform kindergartens into liberatory cultural spaces where tamariki thrive as confident, culturally grounded learners.

Key words: cultural rights, counter-hegemony, culturally sustaining pedagogy, decolonising practice

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the ways in which early childhood education (ECE) settings in Aotearoa New Zealand can serve as counter-hegemonic spaces that affirm the languages, identities, and cultural values of tamariki. Drawing attention to how teaching practices are often shaped by dominant cultural assumptions, it highlights the importance of critically reflecting on pedagogical approaches within bicultural contexts. ECE environments are not neutral; they are socially, culturally, and politically constructed spaces that can either reinforce dominant narratives or actively resist them (Moss, 2010; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2011). The paper argues that early childhood settings possess transformative potential to become sites of resistance, restoration, and cultural affirmation, particularly in relation to children's identities and rights. This argument is situated within the frameworks of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and localised Indigenous knowledge systems.

Drawing on Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony, mainstream educational settings can be seen to reinforce "common sense" Eurocentric worldviews through language, curriculum, and developmental benchmarks. Within early childhood environments, these hegemonic values are often reproduced subtly, through the prioritisation of English, the dominance of Western developmental theory, and rituals that privilege monocultural norms. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) provide frameworks for challenging these dynamics by affirming children's rights to identity, language, and culture. From this perspective, early childhood education (ECE) holds transformative potential to function as a site of resistance, restoration, and belonging, where dominant narratives are disrupted and culturally sustaining pedagogies are enacted.

As both a tertiary educator and an early childhood education (ECE) professional, the responsibility to advocate for children's cultural rights within Aotearoa New Zealand's ECE landscape is significant. These dual roles offer a unique position to influence both pedagogical practice and educational policy, ensuring that the voices, identities, and languages of tamariki are not only recognised but actively affirmed. This position requires ongoing critical reflection on power dynamics, privilege, and cultural safety, as well as a commitment to challenging dominant narratives that marginalise Indigenous and minoritised children. Guided by the principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), this work is underpinned by a commitment to fostering inclusive, culturally sustaining environments where all children are supported to thrive as confident, capable learners.

THE POLICY LANDSCAPE IN AOTEAROA

In Aotearoa New Zealand, early childhood education (ECE) policy is built upon commitments to biculturalism, equity, and inclusive practice. Policy documents that include *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), *Tapasā* (Ministry of Education, 2018), *Ka Hikitia-Ka Hāpaitia* (Ministry of Education, 2020b), and the *Action Plan for Pacific Education (Ministry of Education, 2020a)* form a foundational framework that shapes educational priorities for diverse learners. These documents respond to international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly Articles 8, 29, 30, and 31, which uphold children's rights to identity, education that respects their cultural heritage, and opportunities for cultural and artistic expression (UN General Assembly, 1989).

Te Whāriki, Aotearoa's national ECE curriculum, embeds a vision of children as competent and culturally located individuals whose identities are shaped by their whakapapa and relationships. It is underpinned by the principles of empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships. As a bicultural curriculum grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, it requires all services to honour Māori as tangata whenua and to actively engage with te ao Māori. The curriculum aligns with Article 8 of the UNCRC by affirming children's right to preserve their name, family, and cultural connections. Article

29 is reflected in its emphasis on education that fosters respect for one's own culture and that of others. Article 30 is addressed through its call for inclusion of Indigenous and minority perspectives, and Article 31 is embedded in its recognition of play, storytelling, and cultural practices as valid modes of learning (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Complementing this, *Tapasā* provides a framework for teachers working with Pacific learners, offering culturally responsive strategies grounded in values such as respect, collectivism, and the relational concept of *vā*, the space between people. Tapasā explicitly supports Pacific languages, cultural identity, and community engagement. It supports Article 8 by affirming Pacific children's right to maintain their linguistic and familial identity. It aligns with Articles 29 and 30 by guiding educators to value and sustain children's cultural knowledge systems, and with Article 31 by supporting the expression of Pacific art, storytelling, and music in learning environments (Ministry of Education, 2018).

Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia, the Māori education strategy, promotes the vision of Māori achieving and enjoying success as Māori. It centres the revitalisation of te reo Māori, the inclusion of tikanga and mātauranga Māori in education, and active partnership with whānau, hapū, and iwi. Ka Hikitia clearly responds to Articles 8 and 30 through its commitment to upholding Māori identity, language, and worldview, and to Article 29 through its advocacy for culturally sustaining education. Cultural expression through kapa haka, waiata, and storytelling aligns closely with Article 31 (Ministry of Education, 2020a).

The *Action Plan for Pacific Education* also strengthens commitments to Pacific learners and families by advocating for co-design, language maintenance, and cultural safety. It supports Pacific children's cultural rights by ensuring their identity and worldview are visible and valued in educational settings. Articles 8, 29, and 30 are reflected in its call for affirming Pacific languages and values, while Article 31 is supported through encouragement of cultural participation and creativity (Ministry of Education, 2020a). Together, these policies offer a comprehensive framework for enacting children's cultural rights in ECE. However, as (Ritchie & Rau, 2006) argue, realising these rights in practice require more than policy intent, it demands critical pedagogy, professional learning, and sustained relational engagement. Without these, dominant monocultural narratives may continue to marginalise tamariki Māori, Pacific children, and those from other cultural communities.

Children's Cultural Rights

Children's cultural rights are a cornerstone of both human rights and high-quality early childhood education. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises that children have the right to preserve and express their identity (Article 8), to receive an education that respects their cultural background (Article 29), to participate in the cultural and linguistic life of their community, including those from minority and indigenous groups (Article 30), and to be given the right play and participate freely in cultural and artistic activities (Article 31).

In Article 8 - Right to identity; children have the right to preserve their identity, including nationality, name and family relations. ECE settings must actively support each child's cultural, linguistic and familial identity. This includes using children's names and languages correctly and valuing whānau narratives. Disregarding these rights, either intentionally or unintentionally can

efface children's sense of self and belonging. In Article 29 - Aims of education; education should play a role in developing respect for the child's own cultural identity, language and values as well as the values of others. Teaching should encourage critical consciousness, encouraging pride in heritage and fostering empathy for diverse worldviews. Article 29 also supports a bicultural and/or a multicultural curriculum, not a monocultural Eurocentric one. This aligns closely with Te Whāriki's holistic and cultural sustaining vision. Article 30 - Minority and Indigenous children; children from minority and indigenous groups have the right to enjoy their own culture, practice their religion and use their own language. This article specifically protects Māori, Pacific, migrant and refugee-background tamariki. This includes valuing heritage languages and resisting assimilationist pressures, ensuring space for minority voices. Article 31 - Right to Play, Rest and Culture; children have the right to rest, play and participate freely in cultural and artistic life. ECE programmes should offer cultural relevant forms of play and cultural expression such as storytelling, kapa haka, Pasifika dance and artmaking as these are essential expressions of cultural rights and identity.

In ECE settings, these rights are upheld when children's languages, stories, tikanga, and worldviews are actively incorporated into curriculum, routines, and relationships. Conversely, these rights are infringed upon and violated when dominant monocultural or English-only approaches silence or overlook the cultural knowledge and identities of tamariki and their whānau (Ritchie & Rau, 2006; Smith, 2022). Upholding cultural rights in practice not only affirms identity but strengthens children's sense of belonging, agency, and wellbeing (Te Whāriki, 2017). When children see their culture reflected in their learning environment and are encouraged to use their home languages and cultural practices, they are more likely to feel valued, confident, and connected. For indigenous and minoritised children in particular, culturally sustaining ECE experiences are crucial for resisting the assimilative legacies of colonial education and for building pride in their heritage.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The theoretical and policy foundations that underpin counter-hegemonic practice in early childhood education (ECE) are anchored in both local and global commitments to children's rights, equity, and cultural sustainability. Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, offers a unique bicultural and holistic framework that positions children as active participants in their own learning and emphasises the importance of cultural identity. It affirms that te reo Māori and tikanga Māori are integral to curriculum for all children (p. 6), making it a foundational text for resisting monoculturalism and embedding Indigenous perspectives meaningfully across ECE settings. Alongside this, Tapasā (Ministry of Education, 2018) provides culturally responsive guidance for teachers working with Pacific learners, families, and communities, foregrounding values such as *vā* (relational space), respect, and collective knowledge.

These national frameworks are bolstered by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), specifically Articles 8, 29, 30 and 31, which enshrine children's rights to language, identity, and culture. These Articles serve as a global ethical mandate for educators to resist

assimilative practices and to create learning environments that reflect the rich diversity of children's backgrounds. Freire's (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed offers a powerful theoretical lens through which to interpret these obligations. His emphasis on dialogic learning, critical consciousness, and education as a liberatory act invites kaiako to examine how power operates in their classrooms and to intentionally design pedagogy that disrupts marginalisation. Together, these frameworks call for counter-hegemonic approaches in ECE that acknowledge indigenous knowledge, value cultural diversity and position tamariki as rights-holders and co-constructors of meaning within inclusive and culturally affirming learning communities.

Gramsci's Educational Theory in the Early Childhood Context

While Antonio Gramsci did not specifically address early childhood education, his theories have significantly influenced contemporary pedagogical approaches, including those applicable to early childhood settings. His emphasis on critical consciousness, cultural relevance and the transformative power of education provides a valuable framework. Educators can draw on these principles to create inclusive, reflective and socially conscious learning environments. Core Gramscian concepts (1971) include that of cultural hegemony, the importance of praxis which is the integration of reflection and action, situated intellectuals, the notion of education as a political act and the importance of counter-hegemonic education (Mayo 2010). These core concepts provide a powerful lens for transforming early childhood education (ECE) into a site of social justice and cultural affirmation.

Cultural hegemony reminds us that dominant ideologies can be unconsciously reproduced in ECE settings, marginalising the cultural identities of tamariki and whanau. In response, kaiako can act as situated intellectuals by critically reflecting on their pedagogical choices and co-constructing inclusive, culturally sustaining practices and communities. Gramsci's emphasis on praxis which links theory and action, encourages educators to adapt their teaching through reflective inquiry that acknowledges children's lived realities (Hill, 2003). By understanding that all education is political, teachers can create counter-hegemonic spaces where diverse identities are affirmed (Dahlberg et al., 2013), children are empowered as capable thinkers and early learning contributes to a more just and equitable society.

DISRUPTING DOMINANT NARRATIVES

Te Whāriki has the potential to disrupt dominant cultural norms in early childhood education by centring Māori epistemologies, values, and worldviews, and by advancing a vision of education grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Unlike traditional Eurocentric curricula that often prioritise individual achievement and standardisation, *Te Whāriki* promotes a holistic, relational, and child-led approach that values identity, belonging, and the diverse cultural contexts of tamariki (Ministry of Education, 2017). It challenges dominant norms by acknowledging the importance of Māori concepts such as *mana*, *whanaungatanga*, and *ako*, and by supporting the affirmation of children's languages and cultures in everyday pedagogy (Ritchie & Rau, 2006).

The curriculum's emphasis on responsive, localised practice encourages kaiako to co-construct learning in ways that reflect the lived experiences and cultural backgrounds of children, thereby resisting a 'one-size-fits-all' model often associated with Western educational paradigms (Bauml, 2016). Moreover, its recognition of diverse worldviews, including those of Pasifika and other ethnic communities supports Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which affirms the right of children to enjoy their own culture, religion, and language (UNICEF, 1989). However, this disruption of dominant norms is not automatic. The curriculum's non-prescriptive design means that its transformative potential relies heavily on the critical consciousness and cultural responsiveness of educators (King et al., 2021). In the absence of intentional decolonising practice, dominant cultural norms will continue to marginalise minority worldviews and ways of being.

Creating transformative and culturally affirming spaces in ECE requires intentional, reflective practice that challenges the dominance of monocultural norms and fosters environments where diverse cultural identities can thrive. Central to this work is an authentic commitment to bicultural practice, where *te reo Māori* and *tikanga Māori* are not merely present but meaningfully woven throughout the daily curriculum, in alignment with the vision of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). Such environments honour children as culturally grounded learners by actively engaging whānau in shaping the programme through shared values, languages, and lived experiences (Ritchie & Rau, 2006). Child-led inquiry further strengthens culturally responsive approaches by ensuring that the voices and interests of *tamariki*, particularly those from minoritised communities, inform planning and assessment processes. Moving beyond tokenism, a decolonising curriculum centres Indigenous and diverse worldviews across all learning domains, resisting the marginalisation of non-Western knowledge systems. Language justice is realised through the deliberate inclusion of *te reo Māori*, Pacific languages, and children's home languages in daily interactions, songs, and storytelling, recognising language as a vital expression of identity (UNCRC, 1989). Cultural artefacts and thoughtful environmental design are also key, as kaiako *co*-create settings that reflect the cultural heritage of their learners, rather than defaulting to dominant Western aesthetics. Underpinning these practices is critical reflection, *kaiako* are called to continuously examine their assumptions, confront implicit biases, and expose the power relations embedded in educational practices (Freire, 1970). Through these interconnected strategies, early learning environments become sites of cultural affirmation, equity-driven practice, and transformative learning for all.

Integrating cultural rights into the ECE curriculum

To integrate cultural rights into early childhood education, kaiako must adopt strategies that uphold children's rights to identity, language, and cultural expression as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC Articles 8, 29, 30 and 31). This includes co-constructing curriculum with whānau and cultural communities, valuing their languages and traditions, and designing learning that is responsive to local histories and environments (Ritchie & Rau, 2006). Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) supports this through its principles of family and community, empowerment, and relationships, encouraging kaiako to embed Māori values and promote equity. Multilingual practices, place-based learning, and culturally inclusive environments enable

tamariki to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, affirming their mana and sense of belonging (A. H. Macfarlane, 2015). Frameworks such as Tapasā (Ministry of Education, 2018) and the Vaʻatele Model (Siʻilata et al., 2018) offer guidance for supporting Pacific learners through relational, identity-affirming pedagogies. Ongoing critical reflection and professional development are essential to challenge dominant norms and sustain culturally responsive and rights-based teaching practices (Dalli, 2008; A. H. Macfarlane, 2015)

Creating and transforming cultural spaces

In early childhood education settings in Aotearoa, creating counter-hegemonic spaces involves the intentional disruption of dominant narratives to make space for diverse ways of knowing, being, and expressing (Graff, 2010; Ong, 2022). This process is embedded in everyday pedagogical practice rather than being relegated to isolated cultural events. For example, the integration of pūrākau (Māori storytelling) can occur meaningfully through storytelling sessions, dramatic play, and inquiry-based learning. In one such setting, traditional stories such as *How Māui Slowed the Sun* and *The Eyes of Tāwhirimātea were* explored as part of the curriculum.

A whanau-led harakeke weaving session is a meaningful hands-on learning experience where tamariki, kaiako and whanau come together to share intergenerational Māori cultural knowledge and practice. Guided by a *kuia* (elder), the session begins with a karakia to honour the life force of the harakeke and continues with storytelling, waiata (songs) and tikanga (customs) around weaving, Tamariki learn by helping to prepare and weave the flax into flowers, kono or kete while gaining an understanding of the respect for nature and ancestral traditions. These sessions are more than craft activities; they are rich, intergenerational spaces that strengthen identity, belonging and connection through mātauranga Maori. Whānau gathered to watch, sing, and even join in, making visible their place as co-constructors of the curriculum. The presence of community voices and the acknowledgement of local knowledge transforms the setting into a living, breathing counter-hegemonic space where children's cultural rights were not only acknowledged but actively lived and celebrated. Such practices illustrate how cultural knowledge can be woven into the fabric of daily learning experiences, supporting both cultural rights and creative expression. These activities, grounded in tikanga Māori and guided by te reo Māori, allowed the children to engage with Indigenous knowledge as a living, relevant worldview rather than merely a concept.

These experiences remind us that liberatory practice do not emerge from pre-designed resources or token gestures, but through strong relational, and place-based commitments to the cultures of the children and communities we serve. In these moments, our learning environment shifted; the whānau became co-teachers, and the curriculum emerged from the children's lived relationships and cultural contexts. This inclusive partnership with whānau disrupt the common pattern of centre-determined learning and affirmed the rightful place of community knowledge in our space.

As part of the creative arts programme, children are invited to use materials that reflected their own cultural identities: tapa cloth, koru motifs, Pacific dyes, and traditional tools sat alongside watercolours and pastels. These creative provocations offered children a platform to express pride in their identities and to challenge narrow, Eurocentric ideals of what counts as "art."

Each of these examples illustrates are part of an equity-focused curriculum and not one-off events but a sustained commitment to decentring dominant narratives and making space for the diverse cultural realities of our tamariki. Whether through pūrākau, critical inquiry, or culturally rich artistic expression, educators can actively disrupt assimilationist norms and cultivate spaces where all children are empowered to see themselves and one another as holders of valued knowledge.

Migrant children often navigate multiple cultural worlds and bring with them rich linguistic repertoires, worldviews, and traditions that challenge dominant narratives of monoculturalism in early childhood and school contexts. While formal educational systems in settler-colonial countries like Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and Canada have historically privileged English-medium, Eurocentric frameworks, migrant children and their families frequently carve out cultural spaces, both within and beyond the classroom that resist assimilation and affirm cultural identity (Cummins, 2000; May & Sleeter, 2010). These culturally transformative spaces can emerge through language practices, peer interactions, storytelling, and rituals. In early childhood settings, for example, children who share a home language may use it in play to express humour, affection, and solidarity. Such translanguaging practices, while sometimes viewed as disruptive or peripheral, are powerful expressions of belonging and resistance to monolingual norms (Conteh & Meier, 2014). When educators intentionally create space for these practices by including home languages in print-rich environments, acknowledging multilingual greetings, or incorporating family storytelling, they uphold children's cultural rights as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989, Articles 8, 29, 30) and foster a curriculum of belonging (Webb & Lahiri-Roy, 2019).

Cultural spaces are also co-constructed when migrant children share food customs, special celebrations, or oral traditions with their peers. A child's choice to wear a hijab, recite a prayer before eating, or bring traditional kai to the centre may prompt curiosity and connection. When educators scaffold these moments with openness and respect rather than viewing them as anomalies, they create culturally sustaining environments (Paris & Alim, 2017). Moreover, when whānau are invited to share songs, dances, or cultural artefacts from their homelands, the learning environment expands to include diverse worldviews, unsettling the dominant cultural script of "neutral" Western education (Ritchie & Rau, 2006; Rule & Kyle, 2009).

This interplay of agency and control is a key consideration in this conversation. Migrant children are often expected to conform quietly to dominant language and behavioural norms. Yet culturally sustaining pedagogies are rooted in equity; honouring children's home languages and cultures through visual displays and documentation, incorporating culturally meaningful materials, and engaging families as genuine partners in curriculum design. Such practices recognise migrant families as holders of valued knowledge, not as deficits to be corrected (Gonzales et al., 2005; Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2015). In doing so, early childhood settings shift from sites of assimilation to sites of resistance, liberation, and cultural affirmation. These everyday acts speaking one's home language, representing cultural motifs and symbols, saying a karakia before kai, or sharing cultural stories may seem small, but they carry a deeper meaning. They assert identity, challenge erasure, and signal those multiple ways of being, knowing, and relating are welcomed and honoured in the learning

environment. As kaiako, our task is not only to make space for these expressions but to recognise them as vital counter-hegemonic acts that contribute to a more just and inclusive education system.

Implementation Gaps and Challenges

Despite the progressive frameworks offered by Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), Tapasā (Ministry of Education, 2018) and Ka Hikitia (Ministry of Education, 2020), early childhood education (ECE) settings in Aotearoa continue to face significant implementation challenges in realising children's cultural rights as outlined in Articles 8, 29, 30, and 31 of the UNCRC. These rights, encompassing identity, language, participation in cultural life, and the goals of education are often unevenly upheld across different services.

One prominent issue is variability in practice and teacher readiness. While some kaiako create affirming, culturally responsive environments, others may lack the capability, time, or cultural competency to do so. This results in inconsistencies in the promotion of children's cultural identity and language across centres, undermining Article 8 (preservation of identity) and Article 30 (rights of minority children to enjoy their culture). English monolingualism and a lack of structural support for heritage languages continue to dominate many early learning environments. Although Te Whāriki encourages the use of te reo Māori and home languages, many centres lack multilingual educators or appropriate language-rich resources (May, 2014). This restricts children's ability to express themselves in their first language and diminishes the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural knowledge (Cummins, 2000). As a result, the intent of Article 30 to ensure children's rights to maintain and practise their own language and culture is often not fully realised.

ECE assessment practices often rely on Western developmental norms, which do not reflect the holistic, relational worldviews of Māori and Pacific cultures (Nuttall, 2013; Rameka, 2021). Learning stories and developmental checklists often prioritise individualised cognitive milestones, side-lining values such as whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, or ako. This misalignment may obscure children's culturally embedded competencies, violating Article 29's directive to support the full development of personality, talents, and cultural identity. Furthermore, there is a lack of accountability to ensure these cultural rights are meaningfully enacted. Policy documents frequently signal the importance of culture and language, but there are minimal reporting or review mechanisms to monitor how well these goals are achieved in everyday practice. This often renders culturally sustaining approaches optional rather than integral.

Finally, cultural tokenism remains prevalent. Cultural events such as Matariki, Pasifika festivals, or language weeks are celebrated, but often in isolated, performative ways that lack depth or long-term commitment (Macfarlane et al., 2015). Without sustained engagement with whānau, these efforts risk reducing cultural diversity to surface-level experiences, rather than nurturing it as a living, evolving part of the curriculum. To address these challenges, ECE settings must embed counter-hegemonic practices, invest in professional development, and create systems of accountability that uphold cultural rights as foundational not supplementary components of education.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Transforming early childhood spaces into environments that form an inclusive cultural praxis requires more than cultural displays or occasional language use, it calls for a shift in power, values, and relational practice. In environments that genuinely honour tamariki as cultural beings, strong connections with whānau foster whanaungatanga, reciprocal learning (ako) is shared and shaped by collective wisdom, and tuakana-teina relationships encourage leadership, guidance, and mutual care across different ages and experiences. The kaiako's role extends beyond facilitator to that of advocate; someone who actively challenges assimilationist norms and creates space for multiple worldviews to thrive. This means engaging in collective agency with children and whānau, ensuring language justice is embedded in daily practice, and reflecting critically on whose knowledge is privileged or erased. Through a Gramscian lens, early learning becomes a powerful site for nurturing critical consciousness and cultural belonging from an early age.

The creation of an inclusive cultural praxis in spaces in ECE is both a moral and professional responsibility. Upholding children's rights to language, identity, and culture (UNCRC, 1989; Te Whāriki, 2017) demands that kaiako engage in continuous, intentional, and collective practice. It involves questioning the status quo, promoting equitable participation, and walking alongside tamariki and their whānau in ways that centre their voices, stories, and aspirations. While challenging, this work holds the potential to reimagine early learning as a decolonising, liberatory space, one where all children are seen, heard, and empowered to be fully themselves.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PATRICIA A. L. ONG
Auckland University of Technology

Patricia Ong is a teaching and research academic at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Her current work focuses on culturally sustaining pedagogy and young children's cultural and linguistic rights in early childhood education. She also examines place-based and arts-based approaches that nurture identity, belonging, and culturally grounded learning. Dr Ong's scholarship supports teachers to develop reflective, relational, and inclusive practice across diverse educational settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. She welcomes opportunities for collaborative engagement in research and practice-oriented projects.
Email: patricia.ong@aut.ac.nz

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